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Question of East Timor

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Progress report of the Secretary-General

1. As I indicated in my last report to the Assembly (A/52/349), I have continued to pursue my good offices with increased intensity in the search for a just, comprehensive and internationally acceptable solution to the question of East Timor. I am happy to report that the negotiations that have gone on for many years have moved in a positive direction recently, bringing new promise for an early settlement of the problem.

2. On the basis of the understandings reached at my meeting with the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia and Portugal in June 1997, the tripartite talks have continued at the level of senior officials from both sides under the chairmanship of my Personal Representative, Jamsheed Marker. Since the initial meetings of August 1997, three rounds of senior officials' meetings were held in New York (1 to 3 October 1997, 5 to 7 November 1997 and 6 to 8 May 1998). The talks have been conducted in a serious, confidential and purposeful manner.

3. On 3 April 1998, I met separately in London with the then Vice-President of Indonesia, B. J. Habibie, and Prime Minister Antonio Guterres of Portugal and discussed the need for early progress in the negotiations. On 8 June 1998, I had a useful meeting with the President of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio, in New York.

4. The change of leadership in Indonesia in May 1998 and the new era of reform that the country has embarked upon have opened possibilities for the resolution of this long-running dispute. On 18 June 1998, I met in New York with the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Ali Alatas, who presented a proposal for the solution of the question of East Timor based on the granting of special status to the Territory that would give it a wide degree of autonomy within the Indonesian State. I welcomed the proposal as a positive and important shift in Indonesia's position, while at the same time emphasizing to the Minister the need to involve East Timorese more directly in the process. Soon after, my Personal Representative travelled to Portugal from 25 to 28 June 1998 and conveyed the Indonesian proposal to President Sampaio, Prime Minister Guterres and Foreign Minister Jaime Gama. While in Lisbon, Mr. Marker also held meetings with a wide range of East Timorese representatives. I am happy to report that the Government of Portugal responded in a positive manner to the Indonesian proposal.

5. Mr. Marker then travelled to Indonesia and East Timor from 16 to 23 July 1998. He discussed all aspects of the East Timor issue with President Habibie, Foreign Minister Alatas, other senior civilian and military officials, leading Indonesian opposition politicians and political figures, as well as with members of the armed forces. He also met in

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Cipinang Prison with Xanana Gusmao, the leader of the East Timorese resistance, who is serving a 20-year sentence. In Baucau, East Timor, he met with Monsignor Carlos Ximenes Belo, Nobel laureate and Apostolic Administrator of Dili, Bishop Basilio do Nascimento, Apostolic Administrator of Baucau, the local Indonesian Government authorities and a broad spectrum of East Timorese representatives.

6. On the basis of those extensive discussions, I invited Foreign Ministers Alatas and Gama to New York on 4 and 5 August 1998 for high-level talks aimed at giving the negotiations a new thrust and at breaking the deadlock that had thus far stymied substantive progress. The talks produced very positive results, which might well prove to be a turning point in the resolution of the problem.[1]

7. At those talks, the two sides agreed to hold in-depth discussions on Indonesia's proposals for a special autonomous status for East Timor, without prejudice to their basic positions of principle. Preparations are currently under way for their senior officials to begin intensive discussions beginning in October 1998 under the chairmanship of my Personal Representative and to report to the ministerial meeting at an early date. It is hoped that an agreement can be reached on this issue before the end of the year. Another important outcome of the talks was the agreement to involve the East Timorese more closely in the search for a solution. As stated at the conclusion of the August talks, I have begun an intensified effort to associate key East Timorese leaders in the process. While in Lisbon during my official visit to Portugal, I held very useful meetings on 8 August 1998 with Monsignor Belo and with Jose Ramos-Horta, Deputy President of the Political Commission of the National Council of Timorese Resistance. Further consultations are also being carried out in Jakarta and in East Timor with other East Timorese leaders, including Mr. Gusmao, and similar efforts will continue in the months ahead. It is my strong belief that a more active involvement of the East Timorese is imperative to the peaceful and effective resolution of the problem. Another major step was taken at the talks on 4 and 5 August, with a move towards an eventual normalization of relations between Indonesia and Portugal. The two sides agreed to establish interest sections in friendly embassies in each other's capitals by the end of 1998. It is hoped that this important step, coupled with other measures such as the substantive reduction of Indonesia's military forces in East Timor and the release of all East Timorese political prisoners, will foster confidence and assist in achieving a viable political solution to the question of East Timor.

8. From 20 to 23 October 1997, another round of the All-Inclusive Intra-East Timorese Dialogue (AIETD) was held at Krumbach Castle in Austria, with the assistance of the host Government, Austria, and a number of other Member States that contributed financially. The gathering, which brought together 34 East Timorese of diverse political backgrounds, was held under the same terms of reference as the first two meetings held in June 1995 and March 1996. Without addressing the issue of the political status of East Timor, the participants discussed, and proposed in their final declaration, various practical ideas aimed at assisting the search for a long-term settlement of the problem. Preparations are being made for the holding of another meeting of AIETD in the month of October 1998, also in Austria. I am most grateful to a number of Member States, and especially to the Government of Austria, for providing the financial support and the facilities for the organization of AIETD, which forms an important element in the search for a solution to the problem of East Timor.

9. I am most encouraged by the above developments and intend to build on the progress achieved thus far towards achieving a lasting settlement.

Notes

[1] See press releases SG/SM/6666 and SG/SM/6664 dated 5 and 6 August 1998, respectively.